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AUTHOR Partridge, Susan
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ABSTRACT

Students' essays are increasingly being included in the assessment of their writing ability. One scholar feels that in contrast to more traditional tests of writing ability, the Written Language Assessment bases its assessment on whole pieces of text the students write. The essays represent three different types of writing: expressive, instructive, and creative, which are scored qualitatively and quantitatively. Another scholar states that performance testing reveals the presence or absence of thoughtfulness and understanding, not simple memorization; it requires the teaching of a thinking curriculum to all students; and, by involving them in assessment, it empowers teachers. Many educators believe that the use of portfolios could prove to be the most powerful of all performance assessments, if a reliable way of using them for accountability can be devised. One important advantage of using the writing portfolio in assessing students' writing is that there will be a lot of examples of their writing on a variety of topics and over a long period of time. Good writing assignments should provide for individual differences and for the individual's expression of his/her thoughts and opinions. The thinking processes involved in good writing can be helpful in all learning regardless of the subject matter. Multiple assessments of students' writing must be used if the uniqueness of students is to be considered in the evaluation process. Writing assessment must be in keeping with the current changes in writing instruction. (MG)

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ASSESSING STUDENTS' WRITING IN THE 1990s:

A DISCUSSION

Susan Partridge

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Assessing Students' Writing in the 1990's: A Discussion

In an increasing number of cases, students' essays are being included in the assessment of their writing ability. Cheryl L. Spaulding (7), of Syracuse University, acknowledges that multiple samples of actual student essays make a valuable and long overdue contribution to the battery of standardized tests available to teachers, administrators, and others charged with the task of educating young people, but she warns of some problems to be overcome in establishing trustworthy measures of anyone's written language competence.

In her review of Written Language Assessment, by Grill and Kerwin, Spaulding describes it as "a new standardized test designed to evaluate children's and adolescents' written language competence. In contrast to more traditional tests of writing ability, which tend to use multiple choice items to assess students' abilities to pick grammatical and mechanical errors out of decontextualized sentences, the WLA bases its assessment on whole pieces of text the students write."

The students taking the test write essays over a period of 2 to 5 days. The essays represent three different types of writing: expressive, instructive, and creative. The essays are then scored qualitatively and quantitatively. Spaulding explains the scoring in considerable detail:

Qualitative scores

> The qualitative judgments include ratings of the rhetorical skill evidenced in the piece, the legibility, and the overall

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quality. The scale for these judgments runs from 0 to 4 (from illiterate/illegible to superb-easy to read). For each essay, these three qualitative ratings (rhetoric, legibility, overall quality) are combined into a single quality score, termed General Writing Ability (GWA). Then the GWA scores for the three essays are summed to yield an overall score for General Writing Ability.

Quantitative scores

In addition to this qualitative assessment, three separate quantitative measures are also calculated.

First, a simple word count is used as an indicator of productivity.

Second, word complexity is calculated by taking the total number of syllables in the text and subtracting the total number of words. This provides a measure of the degree to which the writer used multisyllabic words.

Finally, the readability level of each essay is calculated using a formula adapted from Fry's (1977) principles. These grade level equivalent scores represent the average reading difficulty level of the essays produced by the students.

Basically, the readability score is derived from two sources: the number of syllables per 100 words and the number of sentences per 100 words. The more syllables and the fewer sentences per 100 words, the higher the grade level equivalent score.

For each of the three quantitative indices (productivity, word complexity, readability), the scores for the three essays are summed to produce overall scores.

Written language quotient

Thus there are four overall scores of written language competence for an individual: the single qualitative measure of General Writing Ability and the three quantitative measures of productivity, word complexity, and readability. These are summed and turned into a single final score, the Written Language

Quotient (WLQ).

Grill and Kerwin claim that this final score of written language competence is the most useful score for identifying and placing students who may need remedial help with their writing.

Spaulding sees a definite need to train raters. She says that though the studies reported demonstrate that raters can be trained to score papers reliably, never do the authors explain how to go about training new raters so that their ratings are calibrated with the original ratings used to establish the norms for the WLA.

Spaulding also finds the quantitative indices of written language another source of difficulty. She says, "There is nothing inherently better about a 500 word essay than a 300 word essay." This belief of Spaulding's brings to mind an incident that happened decades ago in a rural school; the incident follows:

It was November. The teacher brought in a composition about the Pilgrims and asked the children if they could rewrite it using fewer sentences and include all the ideas contained in the composition. The original and the combined efforts of the children follow:

The Pilgrims were brave. They crossed the Atlantic Ocean. The water was rough. Their ship was the Mayflower. It was a tiny ship.

The Children's Version

The brave Pilgrims crossed the rough waters of the Atlantic Ocean in a tiny ship, the Mayflower.

The children were pleased with their accomplishment in which they used fewer words, yet included all the ideas. Undoubtedly, the teacher's motive was helping her students overcome their habit of writing "choppy" sentences, a common practice among young children.

Grant Wiggins (9) is another among the growing number of those who favor a reconsideration of standards of assessment. Wiggins who is Director of Research for Consultants on Learning, Assessment, and School Structure (class), based in Rochester, N.Y. says that standards refer to qualities, not quantities and that when standards are thought of as the setting of a cutoff, the fact that standards represent differences in kind, not degree -- are hidden. He adds that to equate high standards in a school with high test scores is fallacious reasoning as many gifted students do not perform to high standards though their test scores seem to say otherwise, and other students who have had poor prior schooling or who may have slower learning styles do their daily work to high standards even though they have mastered less content than their peers. "A psychometric tactic," he says, "has caused us to lose sight of quality."

Wiggins favors a switch to performance testing, one of the chief benefits of which, he believes, is the involvement of teachers in the scoring. This benefit will be lost, he says, if districts buy packaged assessment. He mentions the Stanford Writing Assessment Program offered by the Psychological Corpora-

tion; Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich. This test uses holistic and analytic scoring, returns the results to teachers to use as a basis for language arts activities.

Wiggins' conclusion about performance testing follows:

> A switch to performance testing has the potential to benefit American education in three ways: it reveals the presence or absence of thoughtfulness and understanding, not simple memorization; it requires the teaching of a thinking curriculum to all students; and, by involving them in assessment, it empowers teachers.

Ruth Mitchell (3) is another who believes that we need performance assessment as "it focuses on activity, as opposed to the passive bubble-filling of multiple choice tests." She says that writing, its most familiar form, is already a standard feature of program assessment in 28 states. She believes, as do others, that the use of portfolios, with collections of students' work in any subject, "could prove to be the most powerful of all performance assessments, if a reliable way of using it for accountability can be devised."

She explains further that the variety of performance assessments is itself a virtue and offers as an example, "Some history assessments are essays; others are mock trials." In contrast she mentions the sameness of multiple-choice tests, regardless of the subject. In addition to the variety in performance assessments, she states two other reasons why performance assessments are gaining favor: "They evaluate thinking, a major concern of American businesses dismayed by

employees who cannot solve a simple problem; and they enlarge rather than constrict the possibilities for classroom teaching."

Rothman (5) recently reported that in 1990, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) "will undertake its most extensive use of performance-based testing." He wrote:

> The 1990 assessment will include, in addition to traditional multiple-choice questions, mathematics questions assessing students' use of scientific calculators, open-ended math and reading questions, and science questions that require students to draw responses or write essays.

In regard to the writing of essays, Rothman reported:

> Perhaps the most ambitious innovation is the writing portfolio. Although Vermont is now developing a statewide writing assessment that will include the collection of student portfolios, no other large-scale testing program has attempted such a step.

One important advantage of using the writing portfolio in assessing students' writing is that there will be a lot of examples of their writing on a variety of topics and over a long period of time.

It is recalled that many writing assignments in the past left a lot to be desired. In one particular school, for example, students were asked to write what they did over the summer vacation. This assignment was given every September, year after year. The school was a rural school, covering several grades, and some parents had several children in the school. They had no money for trips, no time for hikes, and no time for other "fun

things." There was a lot of work to be done, and the money was needed for the bare necessities of life.

Another remembered assignment in that same rural school was to write about a picture in a text that had been around for years. The picture was that of two goats, traveling in opposite directions, who met on a narrow mountain path. How were they to pass each other? A mother, living in that rural school district had five children, and, when child number five got the "goat assignment," she said that she had run out of ideas with which to help him get started on the composition. It is recalled that some children wanted the goats to fight and to have one goat overcome the other and have him hurled to his death, but some peace-loving, thinking students suggested that one goat lie down and let the other leap over him, and then for each goat to on his way.

This assignment may have told the teacher something about her students, but again it may not have, for in a rural school housing eight grades, most of the ideas as to what happened to the goats had, indeed, been exhausted.

Decades of educational work in various geographical areas and at both the elementary and secondary levels have been convincing that care must be taken in giving assignments so as not to invade a person's privacy or violate his/her code of ethics. Sensitivities ought to be respected. Older students have been known to protest vehemently against such classroom assignments as writing an autobiographical sketch, character

sketches, and about a visit to a graveyard, to mention a few. Fortunately, they were able to articulate their protests, though, unfortunately for some, this meant failing, or dropping, the course; for others, it meant insincere writing.

Obviously, one must have something to say before one can write about it; and, ideally, should want to say it. Good writing assignments should provide for individual differences and for the individual's expression of his/her thoughts and opinions. If such provision is made and proper feed-back given, students may well consider pre-writing and revision as helpful in improving their writing rather than as unpleasant chores.

The role of writing apprehension in writing competency and writing performance has been investigated. It was hypothesized that there would be differences in performance between the high apprehensives and the low apprehensives. The hypothesis for the writing competency as measured by standardized tests was upheld as was the hypothesis for the writing of a narrative-descriptive essay in which self was emphasized. However, the hypothesis for an argumentative essay in which students were asked not to use personal experiences was not confirmed. A study such as this might serve to give teachers pause in assessing students' writing and in the giving of writing assignments.

A considerable amount of student writing in the past has been the feeding back of information given by the teacher or the text; such is not the case with the essay. L.V. Payne (4) has said, "But a student is no machine when he writes an essay; he

is a human being expressing not only what he knows but what he IS."

Since subjects for essays are almost limitless, individual interests can be considered. Payne says, "The only requirement is that the writer know enough about his subject to arrive at some kind of opinion." She defines opinion as: "A belief not based on absolute certainty or positive knowledge but on what seems true, valid, or probable to one's own mind; what one thinks; judgment." She feels that a good opinion "rubs at least a few people the wrong way."

For a number of years, now, there has been found in reputable educational journals considerable material dealing with the integration of reading and writing. It is recalled that the May 1981 issue of The Reading Teacher, published by the International Reading Association, had such articles accompanied by rather comprehensive bibliographies on the subject.

It is felt that the thinking processes involved in good writing can be helpful in all learning regardless of the subject matter. Writing across the curriculum is currently another concern of some educators. Heretofore, writing has been confined largely to English classes. Seemingly, content area teachers didn't want any part of a cooperative movement in writing for fear it would invade their "territory." This was, indeed, unfortunate as there have been, and continue to be, studies which help to evaluate writing as a means of gaining knowledge. Carl B. Smith (6) explained one such experiment thus:

> Copeland (1985) investigated the effectiveness of a writing activity requiring students to develop compositions by synthesizing information read. Three other groups answered multiple-choice questions, followed a directed re-reading activity, or performed an unrelated activity. After these sixth-grade students of average reading ability read an informative passage, they performed one of four specific follow-up activities. All groups were given tests that measured transfer of learning and memory of factual information. Results indicated that the synthesis writing activity enhanced both transfer and memory and was beneficial for both good and poor writers.

It is encouraging to note that there are those who are using writing to enhance content area learning in the primary grades. Evelyn T. Cudd and Leslie Roberts (1) have explained in considerable detail the use of paragraph frames in providing a bridge which helps to ease the transition from narrative texts which primary children understand quite well to expository reading and writing which will confront them in the intermediate grades. Their explanation follows:

> Paragraph frames employ a cloze procedure. Sentence starters which include specific signal words or phrases are provided for the student. When these starters are completed, a paragraph is formed which follows one of the organization patterns commonly used in content area writing.

A few examples of the various paragraph frames used follow:

> Ex. 1. The sequentially organized frame:
> Before a frog is grown, it goes through many changes. First, the mother frog _____
> Next, _____
> Then, _____

Finally, _____
Now they _____

Ex. 4. Enumeration frame: Bats are unusual animals for several reasons.
First, _____
Second, _____
Third, _____
Finally, _____
As you can see, bats are unique in the animal world.

Ex. 7b. Reaction frame in which prior knowledge is tied in with new information gained from reading a selection.

Although I already knew that stars are hot, I learned some new things about stars by reading this story. I learned that the coolest star is red, the warmest star is yellow, and the very, very hot stars are blue. I also learned that seven stars make a shape of a dipper. However, the most interesting thing I learned was that the north star stays in its place. (Amanda, grade 2)

The second type of reaction frame focuses the child's attention on how his/her ideas were revised due to the acquisition of new information.

Ex. 8. Before I read this selection, I thought that there was just one kind of bat. After reading more about bats, I found out that there are fruit bats, vampire bats, and a hare-lipped bat. Besides this, I learned some other new facts about bats. First, I learned that bats are the only mamals that can fly. Second, I learned that the vampire bat is 3 in. long. Finnaly, I learned that bats feed their babies milk like us. (Alison, grade 3)

Among other frames used are comparison/contrast frames. The authors feel that these expository paragraph frames provide children with a structured way of using writing as a learning tool and introduces them to some organizational patterns used by authors to convey information.

Since writing instruction is changing, it follows that

writing assessment should also change. Two methods currently in use are holistic scoring and analytic scoring. Nancy Nesbitt Vacc (8) explains the two methods thus: "Holistic scoring involves reading a writing sample quickly and making an overall judgment about its quality through an evaluation of the sample as an entity without analyzing its specific features. Analytic scoring evaluates writing quality through an analysis of the separate components of writing."

Vacc undertook research which she said "was an initial attempt to study the constructs of teachers' holistic scores by determining the amount of variance in holistic scores that is accounted for by the different features evaluated in an analytic-scoring process." She found that although the teachers involved in the study were trained to use holistic-scoring criteria and an analytic evaluation, they arrived at similar holistic scores through different writing features. She concluded, "Students, whose writing is evaluated holistically by teachers and testing services, will not be able to develop writing skills to their maximum potential as long as the interpretation of teachers' holistic scores of writing samples remains in question."

Arnold D. Lindaman and Melva Lewis (2), of the North Scott Community School District in Eldridge, Iowa, report on their district-wide in-service training program "that has introduced nearly 150 teachers to the writing process during four days of workshops" concerned with "writing across the curriculum."

Lindaman and Lewis say, "Through our staff development

sessions, and on the basis of our reading of the research and our classroom practice, we had shifted our focus from the writing product to the writing process. This shift led us from indirect measures of writing proficiency (those that use "objective" test items) to direct measures (those that call for student writing samples)."

It has been reported that the 1988 National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) results in reading and writing showed few gains and that the gains were mostly in skills rather than in more complex tasks. It seems fitting, therefore, that more and more educators are becoming concerned with the teaching and assessment of writing and are making some progress: The correcting red pencil is disappearing; focus has shifted from the writing product to the writing process; multiple samples of students' writing are kept in portfolios; multiple assessments are being used; teachers are being trained in assessment; and, as evidenced by numerous articles, found in reputable educational periodicals, educators are sharing with fellow educators their findings through related studies and/or practice.

It is concluded that multiple assessments of students' writing must be used if the uniqueness of students is to be considered in the evaluation process. It is further concluded that there are still some assessment problems to be overcome in establishing trustworthy measures of students' writing. Finally, writing assessment must be in keeping with the current changes in writing instruction.

Implications

Assessments in addition to standardized tests must be used if the interests of all children are to be served.

Writing should not be confined to English classes.

Teachers should emphasize the writing process when giving writing instructions.

The correcting red pencil should be used sparingly, if at all. It is believed that mechanics will "fall into place" if students have something to say and learn how to convey to the reader the logic of their thinking.

Teachers should share their successes in teaching and assessing writing.

Educators should keep abreast of all research dealing with writing.

Efforts to find more-trustworthy assessments of writing should continue and, when found, should be put into practice.

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